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ABSTRACT

American children do not bring uniform characteristics to the school setting. The at-risk student actually learns, behaves, and thinks differently from the student considered ideally suited to traditional programming. The poor "fit" between the at-risk students' natural characteristics and the expectations of the traditional school setting can be devastating. While easily mistaken for unmotivated, lethargic, disruptive detractors, these are often bright, talented persons in need of a specially designed environment. The Dent Middle School in Columbia, South Carolina, has developed a program called Target Lab which promises success for at-risk students. The program's alternative climate has removed or neutralized those elements of the traditional setting that thwart the at-risk cognitively, socially, and emotionally. The primary focus is on performance, and students learn that their own behavior can lead to success. Program personnel--a full-time teacher, half-time teacher, volunteers and guidance counselors--use a variety of outside sources and agencies to provide services which strengthen the student and his or her family. The Target students complete much of their work with specially designed software that offers immediate feedback on performance, allowing students to accelerate within the curriculum and enhance their skill and knowledge levels in reading and mathematics. Interdisciplinary units requiring direct teaching and research are used as well. Teachers in the lab become intensely involved with the students' daily lives and decisions, teaching them self-discipline as well as study and organizational skills, and providing models for emulation. Target students are also encouraged to give service to the community. Included in the counseling component of the program are units on encouraging students' appreciation of self-worth, conflict management, communication skills, and study skills. Evaluation shows the program to be successful routinely in the behavior, attitude, and accomplishment of students who accept the challenge of participating in the Target program. (HTH)

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TAKING CARE OF RISKY BUSINESS

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Tammie Powell and Stephen Taylor

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TAKING CARE OF RISKY BUSINESS

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Is "at-risk education" a new term for an old concept? Are the at-risk youngsters of today the traditionally disadvantaged? Are they exceptional learners ? Are there common denominators which link these at-risk students who come from all walks of life?

At-risk students are moving into central focus in our nation's public education system. These are the students who have great difficulty with school life and academic tasks despite their sufficient raw capability or learning potential to successfully master the prescribed performance. They are not handicapped in the sense that learning disorders make them candidates for the entitlements (IDEA/94-142) which guarantee special services. They are, however, divergent in the sense that they differ significantly from the student who is able to negotiate public school traditions and expectations with relative ease.

Children developing in the American culture today do not bring with them uniform characteristics to the school setting. Many have reached school age with marginal parental supervision or marginal influence of adults who teach those traditional values which prepare a child for the traditional school. Children who have spent hours watching television have the potential to be easily distracted and to find the instructional methods of direct teaching too demanding on their attention. If parents are socially and psychologically removed from the school environment, they may undervalue educational opportunities and may even express suspicions about persons and events involved in schools. These domestic facets create the syndrome of "lack of developmental support." This single foundation for divergence may explain intelligent students' inability to internalize or adhere to common rules; they are so accustomed to the unstructured world of beleaguered adults. The world of school with its unique traditions is foreign to them and may even seem alien.

Other characteristics seen in the at-risk usually occur in clusters and also render them susceptible to school difficulties. These include a high need for mobility, a high need for informal settings for learning, a high need for cooperative learning activities with their peers, and an inclination towards gestalt-oriented, creative, divergent, holistic, right-brained thinking which involves needs for relating emotionally to issues and for concretely acting out events and ideas about which they are learning. And so, the at-risk student actually learns, behaves, and thinks differently than the student considered ideally suited to traditional programming. When these elements of at-riskness are combined with the lack of support at home, it is easy to see that they must have a highly developed, working relationship with teachers in order to succeed academically and to become directed into the mainstream of society .

When their characteristics conflict with expectations in the traditional school setting, the poor "fit" between the at-risk students' natural characteristics and the school setting, can be devastating. Students, teachers, and administrators are all stressed by the mismatch with the conventional teacher-centered instruction. In the traditional school setting, the at-risk student meets with failure, frustration, and feelings of rejection and hopelessness. Frequent movement is easily seen as disobedience; frequent interaction with peers is seen as disturbance; thinking and learning divergence is a crosswind to the flow of traditional instruction. The students are not successful and do not flourish in growth. While easily mistaken for unmotivated, lethargic, disruptive detractors, these are often bright, talented persons who must have a specially designed environment. Self-esteem, tightly interwoven with achievement capability, dissolves progressively. Without a chance to "start over", the road to failure is wide open.

Left unserved or improperly served, these students stumble through the grades unprepared and in the middle school years, as their adolescence complicates all of their problems and magnifies their unhappiness, the possibility of escaping school becomes more and more achievable. Many of these students drop out mentally if not physically.

At Dent Middle School, we have found a formula which promises success for the at-risk student through a program called the Target Lab. This program was developed with funding from Target 2000 and is now a technical assistance site.

One of the most important characteristics of the Target Lab is its alternative climate. Those elements of the traditional school setting which thwart the at-risk cognitively, socially, and emotionally are removed or

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neutralized. The primary focus is on performance and students learn that their own behavior can lead to success. This helps to promote a sense of self-discipline. The class bonds with each other to create a supportive peer group.

The Dent Target Lab is staffed by one full time teacher and one half-time teacher. There are volunteers who work with students as well as volunteers who help with the paperwork for the program. Guidance counselors are available to the students on a needs basis. The Target personnel use a wide variety of outside sources and cooperation with other agencies to help provide services to the students which strengthen the student and/or his family.

The Target students complete much of their work with specially designed software offering immediate feedback on performance. This allows students to accelerate within the curriculum and enhance their skill and knowledge levels in reading and mathematics. Interdisciplinary units requiring direct teaching and research are used, also .

Teachers in the Target Lab become intensely involved with the students' daily lives and decisions, rescuing them from many circumstances which have delimited their school progress, teaching them self-discipline, study skills, organizational skills, and providing models for emulation. Since at-risk students do not effectively internalize behaviors or values of persons with whom they have no rapport, it has been critical that these staff members become special to these nurture- hungry children. Regular and routine contact between these adults and parents has led to positive growth in the students.

Target students are encouraged to give service to the community. Some students have worked in local homeless shelters while other students have given time to work with mentally retarded adults. Art projects, tutoring, and mentoring have all been accomplished by Dent at-risk students in cooperation with area elementary schools. Students in each grade level worked to raise money to use in putting together Thanksgiving baskets. The students were taken to the grocery store where they practiced wise shopping skills in order to buy the food. They then raised money to provide Christmas gifts for children who were in need. This project grew to providing gifts for nine children. Target formed partnerships with the Northeast United Methodist Church and Toys For Tots enlisting community support for the project.

An integral part of the program is the counseling component. The counseling component includes units on building communication skills, conflict management and mediation, study skills, enhancement of self-esteem, building of self-confidence, law-related education, and goal-setting and decision-making skills. Counseling is done with groups, individuals and through windows of opportunity depending upon a student's needs.

This program has resulted in a restructured, specialized classroom which encourages students to appreciate their self-worth, strengths and weaknesses in others, the value of learning, and managing emotions. Evaluation shows the program to be successful in a number of facets but program staff see the success routinely in the behavior, attitude, and accomplishment of those students who accept the challenge of participating in the Target program.

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